MARYLAND
Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee

Date: January 28, 2022

To: Maryland Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (MBPAC)

From: Patti Stevens, Eastern Shore MBPAC Representative

Subject: Proposed Language regarding Trails for Maryland State Rail Plan Update

In the last two years MBPAC members and the stakeholders they represent have expressed strong interest in trail development on regional rail corridors that are inactive or that have little rail traffic. At the October meeting panelists shared successes and challenges in trail development in neighboring states and around the country. A review of other state rail plans showed that most include a process for reviewing rail lines for potential abandonments and for evaluating future use as trails, utility corridors, and multi-modal transportation.

Significant developments since Maryland released the last State Rail Plan in 2015 make the case for addressing the potential use of rail corridors as trails in the update. These include:

- Dramatic increase in utilization of existing trails and the demand for more places to recreate, socialize, and travel safely due to the ongoing COVID pandemic.
- Demonstrated positive economic, health, and community impacts of rail to trail projects and proven safety of rails with trails in US 2021 DOT Best Practice report.
- Availability of increased federal funding for infrastructure projects prioritizing those with regional and intra-state impact.

Drawing on examples from other state rail plans the following suggestions are recommended for the update of the Maryland State Rail Plan:

The rail system inventory (Chapter 4 of the current plan) should include a map of inactive rail lines identifying what entity holds the right of way and a description of associated facilities.

The Evaluation of Long-term Rail Projects (currently Chapter 6) should include criteria and a process for reviewing low-volume lines and potential rail abandonments in the state for sustainable future use as multimodal corridors as outlined in Federal Rails to Trails legislation. The evaluation of potential future trails should consider connectivity with existing and planned trail networks in Maryland and adjacent states (for example, the East Coast Greenway and Virginia's Eastern Shore Rail Trail).

Chapter 6 lists expansion of parking as improving quality of service and system preservation, but the context is only automobile parking. Secure bicycle parking should merit the same criteria points as automobile parking, at least in urban and suburban areas.

Many of the projects listed have the potential to either improve or deteriorate pedestrian connectivity. Under project evaluation criteria in chapter 6, it should be clear that projects get a higher score if they remediate a pedestrian connectivity problem across the tracks, a relatively high score if they maintain existing pedestrian connectivity, and that they get a lower score if connectivity is reduced.

Chapter 7 on rail safety should include at least a paragraph indicating some of the tradeoffs including explicit recognition that some types of improvements that prevent pedestrian fatalities on the track can increase the risk of pedestrian fatalities elsewhere if safe alternative routes are not provided when tracks are closed to pedestrians or increase automobile use with resulting health and safety impacts.

In line with the goals of both the Maryland State Rail Plan (described in Chapter 3) and the Maryland Transportation Plan, the impact of potential rail-to-trail projects should consider **System Preservation** of assets and investments, **Community Vitality** "encouraging land use decisions for access to multi-modal options," and **Economic Prosperity** "enhancing connectivity between nodes and improving access to activity centers." As with other rail projects in the plan, projected costs and potential sources of funding for trail development should be identified.

If MDOT determines that a right of way is no longer needed for rail purposes but has potential for recreational use, it should be assigned an interim use as a non-motorized travel corridor with retaining the right of way. MDOT would consult with DNR and stakeholders along the corridor for ongoing planning and development of potential trails.

Specific examples of high impact rail trail projects that would achieve the outlined goals are:

- Amtrak needs a new rail bridge across the Susquehanna River to accommodate their higher speed train service and the lack of a safe bike/pedestrian crossing of the Susquehanna River is the single largest gap in the quickly developing 3,000 mile long East Coast Greenway. With many innovative and efficient rail-with-trail examples on bridges in the US and around the world, every effort should be made to creatively address both these goals in a single project.

- VDOT has funded project planning for the 50-mile Eastern Shore Rail Trail from Cape Charles to Hallwood Virginia on the inactive the Bay Coast Line. Canonie Atlantic Corporation which operates the line is interested in continuing the rail trail into Pocomoke City, Maryland. Beyond that inactive and low activity rail lines allow for connection to Pocomoke State Forest, Snow Hill, Berlin, and Salisbury. MDOT should conduct a feasibility study on the extension of the Eastern Shore Rail Trail in Maryland.

References:

2015 Maryland Statewide Rail Plan

World Trails Network Report on the Impact of Covid on Trails shows dramatic increase in usage.

Economic Impact Study of Great Allegheny Passage Trail in 2019 reports that tourism along the GAP Trail created an economic impact in 2019 of more than $121 million, translating to $800,000 per mile.

US Department of Transportation 2021 *Rails with Trails Best Practice Report* update notes significant increase of rails with trails and an increasing trend of building rails with trails along passenger rail and rail transit lines. In 2002, 65 rails with trails spanned 279 miles in 30 states. By 2018, there were 343 rails with trails spanning an estimated 917 miles in 47 states.

Virginia Eastern Shore Rail Trail Project seeks partners.
www.virginiadot.org/projects/hamptonroads/eastern_shore_rail_to_trail_study.asp